

Trans-gendered American theater

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Yuki Endo

Luce Irigaray begins her essay called 'Sexual Difference' with:

Sexual difference is one of the important questions of our age, if not in fact the burning issue. According to Heidegger, each age is preoccupied with one thing, and one alone. Sexual difference is probably that issue in our own age which could be our salvation on an intellectual level.¹

It seems understandable then that today's American theater has been enthusiastic about vulnerability of the conventional definition of gender. That could be a reason why Harvey Fierstein, one of the best American gay playwrights, has been arresting the theatergoer's attention. His *La Cage aux Folles* (1983), in which male characters' natural gender is reversed playfully as well as seriously, is one of the Broadway's most successful musicals.

Another hit of Fierstein, his *Torch Song Trilogy* made up of *The International 'Stud'* (1978), *'Fugue in a Nursery'* (1979), and *'Widows and Children First'* (1979), is his dedicated quest for "[a] miracle of modern sex" beyond the heterosexual framework.² Arnold, the central figure, is destined to sing a torch song time after time lamenting over unrequited love; nonetheless he believes in the amazing grace of love. He has yet to stop seeking for it. While he is in and out of love, heartbreaking solitude threatens to overwhelm him. Even so, he is not necessarily in low spirits, for the tension seems to keep him alive. One might be convinced that, varied sexual orientation tolerated, men/women need men/women in order to love each other and to be saved from ruinous depression.

Furthermore the plight of AIDS victims intensifies the controversiality of homosexuality issues. The public has been devastated by the deaths of celebrities of theater and screen.

Homosexuality combined with AIDS victimization has helped urge American society to be highly gender-conscious. It is by no means easy to face each case of the deadly disease; still harder for those who have great difficulty in accepting their own flesh and blood's sexual orientation when it is disturbing to them. William M. Hoffman and Larry Kramer won themselves unmistakable critical acclaim with *As Is* (1985) and *The Normal Heart* (1985) respectively. In marvelously touching manners both plays illustrate the possible salvation with love as well as the disastrous helplessness of gay men and the visible and invisible discrimination against them.

What Terrence McNally delineates in his teleplay *Andrea's Mother* (1990) has much to do with Hoffman's and Kramer's work. By the end of the story the mother of a man who died of AIDS has begun to inwardly approve of all of his way of life, and understand that love can be great help in enabling one to accept those with different values. In such ways social observation of

diversification of sexual preferences seems to give fresh impetus to serious reconsiderations of gender-centered concepts.

Many men have, under the circumstances, tried to free themselves from the cultural and social bondage that has circumscribed them in traditional roles of males. Men than before have also gradually started to come out and acknowledge themselves to be homosexual. It seems as if the conventional boundaries of both sexes have become so blurred that the demarcation line between them is open to dispute.

Curiously enough, though, it is women that seek fundamentally renewed ideas of gender. At long last women have decided to break shackles of sexual exploitation. Noteworthy attempts have been made to redefine 'gender' in different ways by mostly (culturally-) French scholars such as Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray. In her collected essays *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray challenges the fixed idea that "[t]he 'feminine' is never to be identified except by and for the masculine, the reciprocal proposition not being 'true'." ³ Basically she, as most feminists do, refutes so-called "phallocratic" Freudianism:

The "feminine" is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex. Hence the all too well-known "penis envy." How can we accept the idea that woman's entire sexual development is governed by her lack of, and thus by her longing for, the male organ? Does this mean that woman's sexual evolution can never be characterized with reference to the female sex itself? ⁴

In order to reassess the roles women foisted upon them women have been spoken out and published in academic circles more and more exuberantly and profusely. Their undertakings have encouraged Japanese as well. Among others, Chizuko Ueno and Chikako Ogura are remarkable theorists of feminism who exemplify this. In her *A Critical Analysis of the Myth of Sex*, Ogura remarks, "...gender is embedded in language. Gender is nothing but a sign, which is impressed on our minds, just like a brand marked on cattle."⁵ Women are still supposed to be kept hampered culturally and politically.

Turning to theater, Karen Finley is a vigorous practicing artist who is outstanding as well as controversial. She has created all her work for herself to perform alone, which consists of monologues loaded with outward and inward fury and directed her anger toward male chauvinism which, even though American women appear to enjoy as much freedom as men do, persistently underlies present American society. Women, she perceives, are absorbed in subordination so much so that they cannot help but deny their own femininity. Finley's *We Keep Our Victims Ready*, produced by Yale School of Drama and directed/performed by the dramatist in March 1992, had a scene where she showed her almost naked body soiled with a watery paste of chocolate or something. It seems as if she intended to obliterate all sexual signs from the female body so as not to help satisfy males' desire in which they want the female nude to arouse them. Insofar as men are concerned, women prefer asexuality; otherwise men will exploit women in

order to dominate them, taking full advantage of the male-centered society.

In *The Constant State of Desire* Finley portrays a castrated and raped man to demonstrate women's revengeful indignation at the age-long sexual discrimination; part of its monologue goes:

I drive down to Wall Street and break into the Exchange. I go up to all the traders and cut off their balls. They don't bleed, only dollar signs come out. They don't miss their balls 'cause they're too busy fucking you with everything else they've got.

.....

Ruenne. Ruenne sleeps with a gun under her pillow. for every time she has intercourse with her husband he defecated uncontrollably as he has orgasm.... ...she found the gun to do a better job. She puts that gun in her husband's asshole every time he is about to cum. The gun up his ass gives her such a sense of power.⁶

These excerpts give a good picture of an inverted sexual dominance/subservience that derides illusory virility. The portrayal of a man with the genital organs damaged doesn't leave intact a predominant idea of the masculine.

Finley's artistic ideas, which originate in her critical viewpoint of undefeated phallogentrism, are said to be extremely progressive and so revolutionary that they tend to be highly offensive to audiences. One might find symbolic her taking part in the "N[ational] E[ndowment for the] A[rts] Four" lawsuit in which four performance artists have challenged the constitutionality of the NEA's 'decency' standard.⁷ It can't be doubted that Finley has contributed to contemporary American theater; even so she remains peripheral for she is not a playwright and/or a player in a conventional sense but a 'performance artist' doing 'crossover' job, creating theatrical collage, as it were.

Another prominent contribution has been made by Maria Irene Fornes, who "after three decades of a richly committed life in the theater...is still working on the margins."⁸ Untraditional paradigms of gender is a crucial issue for Fornes. This Cuban-born dramatist has been interested in what a woman's life is, and her racial/cultural background enables her to depict men and women in unprecedented perspectives. Her *Sarita* (1984), a play with music, gives a fresh biographical portrait of a girl who is writhingly entangled in her contradictory desires for both her boyfriend and husband and for a life of her own. *Sarita* ends up stabbing her lover/destroyer, and in doing so barely avoids her ontological collapse; yet it is suggested that her faithful and loving husband is still staying with her; in other words, it seems implied here that women might, even if their affectionate trust is recurrently betrayed, believe men.

The conflict of desires in women's minds appears so violent in Fornes' *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977) that it creates both man-hate and self-loathing. For women, it seems to be suggested, men are not only what dispossess women of their means of asserting themselves; they are abhorrent tyrants. Julia, the friend who is closest in personality to the protagonist and belongs in the most essential part of 'the woman' *Fefu* represents, has a bizarre hallucinatory vision when lying in bed: she is as if hospitalized, and men are torturing her. She describes:

They clubbed me. They broke my head. They broke my will. They broke my hands. They tore my eyes out. They took my voice away.⁹

She even goes on to say: "The human being is of the masculine gender."¹⁰ Men, thus, are revealed as lowgivers/exploiters, and women in frustrated rage, seem to attempt to become masculine instead of being themselves. Fefu aims a rifle at her husband — it may or may not hold a blank — but it seems like he would doubtlessly only pretend to fall dead; Fefu sounds truthful when saying, "It's a game we play."¹¹ At the present she can't help but abandon all hope of revolting against male rulers. Women's urge for insurrection remains; that is, their enmity runs still deeper, and these dissatisfied feelings are instead given out to themselves; such being the case, it might seem inevitable for Fefu's other self, Julia, to die a self-sacrificial death at the end of the play in order to eschew the total disintegration of a woman's identity.

The twisted hostility to men that *Fefu* illustrates is obscure in *Sarita*, which was produced a few years after it; one might, therefore, say that Fornes sounds ambivalent in her moral assessment of men; still this doesn't mean she is irresponsible as a feminist writer; on the contrary it is exciting to voice conflicting viewpoints on such intensely controversial issues as gender-related ones.

One part of women's aversion to men tends to be self-destructive, as is implied in Fefu's killing of Julia. It not only confusingly agitates them but causes them to loathe themselves as well as fellow women. Even so, the 'sorority' the play portrays appears at the moment to be the most reliable alternative left for women to prevent existential breakdown. One might sense even a homoerotic kinship among them. This seems to coincide with the fact that the play has no male characters; Fefu's husband remains offstage and is only referred to. It seems as if Fefu and her friends form a female community that is so exclusive that men are not welcome in it.

But women's loathing of men, overt or covert, spawns more stumbling blocks, it seems. More than a decade has passed since French writer Hélène Cixous made an attempt to see things in a wide perspective and to stay away from egocentrism on women's part. In her play with music entitled *The Name of Oedipus* (1978) she demonstrates that there is a possibility that both men and women can be saved from mutual alienation. Yale School of Drama's production in December 1991 of the work suggests that Cixous' idea of gender is still worthy of appreciation even in the 90s. In the play at least, she appears to basically accept collaboration with men while some extremely rigorous feminists are obviously antagonistic toward them.

Although its story line derives from Sophocles's text, Cixous' version intentionally shifts the focus from Oedipus to Jocasta. The new text, however, is not just an inverted *Oedipus Rex* where dire tragedy blights only Jocasta's life. Both characters suffer terribly. More important, the woman sounds undefeated despite her crisis whereas the man seems beaten. Jocasta offers help to Oedipus:

I wanted to deliver him from names.

All the names that pass for gods.
 That impose themselves by fraud,
 That we adore and obey as "gods":
 Father, mother, truth, life, death, fault, debt, wife, truth,
 Husband, king, birth, who can say which they are?¹²

It is suggested here that a woman doesn't have to take place of a man, but that both sexes should cooperate in order to restore the identity of each other. In fact, in this play the feminine and the masculine are on equal terms, perhaps for the first time in the *history of mankind*.

American contemporary theater has been increasingly involved in changes in the notion of gender in the very midst of the Broadway scene as well. There the majority of the patrons consists of political and cultural establishment people who yet accept, not necessarily willingly though, such diversified attempts at the renewal of the concept of gender. Needless to say, the farther away one goes from Broadway, the more untraditional gender-related ideas one may meet with. Off-and off-off Broadway have presented revitalized interpretations of world masterpieces such as Christopher Marlowe's *Edward the Second* with the homosexual relationship of the male characters in focus.

But while the too generally approved notions of masculinity and femininity are being redefined, on the other hand a reactionary climate is spreading in a wider social context, as is shown in antigay legal proposals being put to the vote nationwide. So far we have a good many theater artists who have ventured to reshuffle conventional men's and women's roles. It remains to be seen if they will be able to outlive the growing backlash of intolerance with regard to sexual orientation and also be successful as dramatists. In terms of gender, men seem to be mostly obsessed with the surviving of persistent social intolerance and AIDS victimization and fail to truly commit themselves extensively to gender issues; in other words, they are, one might say, too egocentric if not self-congratulatory to be attentive to the other side.

Women, to the contrary, seem determined to rearrange the entire classification of gender. Resolutely they are not merely taking revenge on men for their age-long sexual discrimination; but they are undertaking to liberate men so that women themselves may enjoy reorganized paradigms that will annihilate sex-related prejudice and harassment. Women's insight is that even if men seemingly predominate women, they are as discriminated against as women are, and have to suffer sexually and politically biased social principles which have lasted seemingly forever. Women successfully keep their wide perspective with respect to gender consciousness.

NOTES

¹ 'Sexual Difference,' tr. Seán Hand, in *French Feminist Thought*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) 118.

² *Torch Song Trilogy* (New York: Samuel French, 1978) 64.

³ 'The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,' *This Sex Which Is Not One*, tr. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 85.

⁴ *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 69.

⁵ *A Critical Analysis of the Myth of Sex* (Tokyo: Gakuyo Shobō, 1988) 153.

⁶ Lenora Champagne, ed., *Out From Under* (New York: Theatre Communications, 1990) 62-63.

⁷ *American Theatre* Sept. 1992: 50.

⁸ Bonnie Marranca, "The Aging Playwright and the American Theater," *Voice* 16 June 1992, 94.

⁹ Fornes, *Fefu and Her Friends* (New York: PAJ, 1978) 33.

¹⁰ *Fefu and Her Friends* 35.

¹¹ *Fefu and Her Friends* 11.

¹² A passage can be found in the program of the play published by Yale School of Drama.

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